

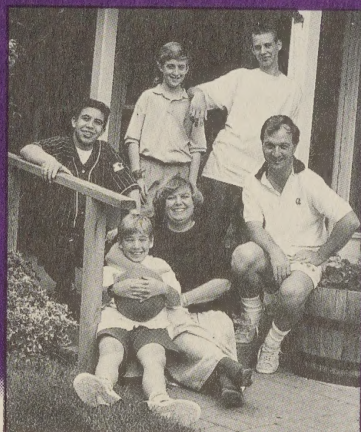
Orientating Children and Youth to Foster Care

A Resource Guide

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Orientating Children and Youth to Foster Care

A Resource Guide

Prepared for
The Ministry of Community and Social Services
by Beth Hoen and Mary Thelander
Beth Hoen and Associates




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Année internationale de la famille

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Acknowledgements

This resource package has its roots in a conviction that children and youth need information to make foster care work for them. The more they understand about the system they are entering and their own rights and responsibilities, the more likely they are to have a productive experience.

In 1990, the Ministry of Community and Social Services undertook a study of the safety of children and youth in care. This study resulted in the report *Review of Safeguards in Children's Residential Programs*. The report emphasized the importance of informing children about their rights and responsibilities in care in a way they can understand.* It also

raised awareness that, sometimes, despite the acknowledged strengths of foster care, a child in a foster home may feel isolated. A later study *Reducing the Risk of Abuse in Foster Care* focused on safety and safeguards in foster care programs. It noted the importance of orienting children and youth to foster care, to what they can expect and who they can contact when they need help.** Those who contributed to these studies provided the basis for this resource package, and we thank them.

Many people shared their ideas about foster care to make this resource package possible: children and youth who are or have been in foster care, foster parents, workers,

* Ministry of Community and Social Services, *Review of Safeguards in Children's Residential Programs*, 1990, p. 37

** Beth Hoen and Mary Thelander, *Reducing the Risk of Abuse in Foster Care: A Study Completed for the Review of Safeguards in Children's Residential Programs*, 1992, p. 31-32

probation officers, managers of foster care and experts in the field. In particular we thank Youth in Care Connections Across Ontario. They gathered and provided valuable feedback on drafts and sought illustrative materials for the package.

A special thanks to Dan, Brenda and Shawn, for their poems.

We hope you will find the resource package useful in developing and strengthening your orientation for children and youth in foster care.

Hugh Robinson
Ministry of Community and
Social Services
Safeguards
Project Manager

Beth Hoen Mary Thelander
Beth Hoen and Associates

Introducing this resource package

What this resource package is

This resource package is a starting point for organizations providing foster care to develop foster care orientation for children and youth.

Orientation starts with what children and youth need to know before they move to their first foster care placement and continues as foster care unfolds for them. Orientation means ongoing support: talking and listening between foster children or youth and the adults involved in foster care. Orientation responds to the changing needs of children and youth as they move through foster care.

Foster youth, foster parents and operators of foster care shared their experiences and ideas for this resource package to help children and youth in foster care. They stressed how important it is for children

and youth to have the information and tools necessary to make foster care work for them. The package uses the ideas of foster youth and foster parents about what people in foster care need to know and how to provide it.

Why this resource package was developed

Children and youth have expressed confusion and anxiety about moving into foster care: being "scared about living with new people and [with] new rules to live by...;" and "her experience would have been made much easier by letting her know what she was getting into...."

The resource package was developed to help foster care operators, workers, probation officers, foster parents and foster youth design orientation that fits their own organization. These groups suggested the kinds of

questions that must be raised as children and youth enter foster care and, for some, as they grow up in foster care. The questions are not answered, because the answers vary for different foster care operators and foster parents. The answers and how they are developed and shared is up to you. This depends in part on the children and youth involved—their differences in experience, language, culture and ability to understand. However, the principles of sharing information and listening remain the same.

The package is not for use as an orientation handout to children and youth. It is a resource for you to develop your own orientation.

Who this resource package is for

The resource package is for operators of foster care, workers, foster parents and youth in care who are interested in foster care orientation. The resource package was developed primarily with children and youth in mind. However, everybody benefits when they

all work together and when they have the same information. Foster children, foster families, natural families and workers all need a common understanding of what foster care is and what they can expect.

The resource package is valuable because it reflects the views of people involved in foster care, including a variety of foster care sectors: child welfare, young offenders and others. As such, it is a basis for foster care operators to develop materials and orientation approaches that provide the necessary information for everyone in the foster care program.

What's in this resource package

As a starting point for developing foster care orientation, the resource package identifies the topics children, youth, foster parents and staff pointed out as important. The package uses questions and topics, because *"kids can't always think of questions to ask but they need to know what is going on."* Some youth may fear asking "stupid questions." Knowing questions of other children and youth may help them be

more secure in asking. The answers are not here, only the questions that need answers and discussion. So every operator will need to answer the questions and share the information in a way that suits their program.

Youth contributed their thoughts by providing feedback to drafts through local youth in care groups and Youth in Care Connections across Ontario. Some thoughts appear as quotations and poems throughout the package.

Ideas about orientation...

This next section presents ideas about how to provide orientation and support to children and youth in foster care. Some foster care operators and youth groups have found that these ideas work for them. With changes to fit your organization and situation, they may work for you.

a) The Timing

When and how often to go over the topics with children and youth is important. Although the package is about orientation, it goes beyond what children, youth and foster parents need to know

when they first become involved in foster care. *It raises questions to be answered about what it is like from the beginning to the end of foster care.* The questions of children and youth change while they are in care, rather than disappearing with experience. This requires thinking about what answers and support foster children and youth and foster parents need during the whole of their foster care experience. The resource package attempts to cover the kinds of questions that come up in the beginning and as foster care unfolds for a child.

Some questions and topics in the resource package must be reviewed regularly because they are required by legislation—like rights and complaints procedures. Other topics should be repeated because the child or youth's ability to understand and interpret changes with experience and age. Once is not enough for many topics to be discussed with children and youth.

b) Talking Together

Sharing information and providing support involve talking together. Much of the package is in the form of questions because questions imply someone answering. The reference material "comes alive" by people using the information as a guide or an "ice breaker." The material needs to be used to discuss, share and talk, and to develop friendships with foster children and youth. Youth emphasized *"It cannot be simply another handout; it must have a personal human aspect."*

Talking together also suggests considering cultural differences and translating into other languages, and special forms of communication such as bliss symbols, sign language, or facilitative communication. Age, development and ability also impact on understanding, and differences or special needs may require special attention. Orientation means talking and listening—give and take.

c) Youth to Youth

The best orientation can be the one provided by someone who has been there. *Foster youth have been there.* Youth in care have stated they want to help in orienting other youth and children to make the orientation experience "more explanatory and dynamic." They understand the urgency of apparently unimportant questions and the emotion behind the questions. They want to help through sharing. Involving youth in the planning and delivery of orientation and on-going support of foster children and youth is important to successful orientation.

d) Getting It Right

The resource package is a guide; it requires change and translation for different groups of children and youth. Their ages, length of time in care, culture and language, developmental level and ability to understand—all these impact on what, how and how much can be shared. Getting orientation right for everyone will mean having a variety of approaches and strategies to help everyone to be able to use the information.

e) *Broadening Your Approach to Orientation*

Before you begin to develop or change your current foster care orientation, you may want to consider making sure you have agreement about how things are done in foster care. You also may want to talk about what information should be covered in orientation.

Getting people together to talk is a first step in developing and expanding orientation and ongoing support for foster children and youth.

f) *Planning Orientation*

Having everyone in foster care involved—children and youth, foster parents, workers and senior staff—will help to make sure that people understand each other. It will test whether people are using the same language and meaning when they talk about foster care procedures, that is, the ways things are done in foster care. Also, it will allow everyone to share their views about how these procedures in foster care feel to each group.

You can develop your approach to orientation in stages. For example, you may want to work first on how preplacement planning

happens and what children, youth and foster parents can expect. Once you have agreement, then you can together decide how this information should be shared, when, how often and by whom. Groups of foster youth or foster parents might take over the planning for some aspects of orientation.

g) *Approaches to Orientation*

Orientation involves getting information across to children and youth and listening to make sure they understand the information.

Many foster youth, foster parents and operators believe children and youth learn best from other children and youth. Some foster care operators have developed buddy systems to link children and youth with older experienced youth. Some have established groups to orient and to provide ongoing support for children and youth with similar interests or needs.

The use of groups in orienting children and youth promotes a sense that they are not the only one. These shared experiences will help them gain confidence. Brief presentations and discussions by other youth in care also can

be effective in making foster care understandable and reducing feelings of isolation. Discussions with foster parents and their children will help foster children and youth understand their views.

Talking individually with a worker is an important way to get information and understanding about foster care. For some children and youth, it may be the best or most practical way to start. These opportunities may occur during the plan of care process, review of the plan of care or other times when a worker comes in contact with a child or youth about foster care. Talking with foster family members also can be helpful to expand this understanding. In the foster home, the parents may be the most available people to answer questions. If the foster parents' natural children are well oriented, they also can help foster children understand and adapt to foster care.

Orientation is an opportunity to develop creative ways to help children and youth feel comfortable and confident in foster care. Some foster care operators have tried having youth work

in reception areas where children and youth come in. Others have used "hot lines" answered by youth to provide information and a listening ear. You may be able to identify times or locations where children and youth feel especially anxious and come up with ideas to help them feel more comfortable.

h) Resource Materials

Foster care operators or groups of people involved in foster care can develop or use written and taped resource materials for particular groups of children and youth. They will be most effective and useful if they are age appropriate and consider special needs. Children and youth have different learning styles: some may relate easily to written material, while others may get more from video or audio tapes.

Video and audio tapes of children and youth in discussions may enable children to identify with their peers and better understand foster care, rights, responsibilities or procedures. Videos or pictures of the foster family, home and neighbourhood may help children and youth feel more

comfortable with these new situations.

Written materials might include pamphlets, picture books, handbooks, daily planners and posters about foster care, the foster care operator's complaints procedures, and rights. These will give children and youth something they can read on their own and refer to later.

Age-appropriate illustrations, use of cartoons and comics help materials come alive. Interactive learning through workbooks or computer programs may help some children absorb the information. A binder format for a handbook or handouts would permit adding more in-depth information as the child matures and needs more information.

Information created by the foster child or youth and foster family will help make details more personal. Simple forms that summarize details about a new foster family and home can help children and youth. Forms for foster families that children and youth complete can help to introduce each other in non-threatening ways.

Written and taped information is important and provides opportunities for

children to take in information in different ways. However, *resource materials cannot replace interaction with other children and youth, foster parents, workers and others.* Ongoing communication can continually clarify information and promote a growing understanding of foster care and how it can help.

This resource package is for you

As you look through the package, you may find some of the material and questions fit well in your organization and situation, and some may not apply. You may want to use some pages as an outline for group discussions with children and youth. Some pages may be more appropriate for individual meetings between buddies or between children and their workers. Or you may want to develop your own lists of questions and answers and your own pamphlets or handbooks.

This resource package is for you.

Coming into care and foster home placement

Why?

Why am I going into care?
...staying in care?
How long will I be there?
Why can't I go back
home?

What about my natural family?

Where's my family going to be?
What will happen to them?
When will I see them?
Can I call them?
Will we get back together?

What does being in care mean?

Who do I have to tell my story to?
Who else will I have to talk to and see?
What is the agency/probation office?
What does my status/court order mean?
Does moving mean a change in status?
What assessments and check-ups
do I have?

[Sample of Personal Information form on page 16.]

Where am I going?

Can I visit first?
Do I have a choice?
Can this be a trial placement?
What can I take?
Will my next foster home be
the same?

Who do I call if I need someone?

Helping children and youth get started in the foster home

How do I fit in?

Whose name do I use?

How do I feel about being in care?

What's a foster kid? Can I meet others?

How am I like them and how am I different?

Where do I belong?

How can I be myself? Show others myself?

How can I make this my place?

What's this Foster Home like?

What kids live there -- foster and natural?

What does this family do together?

Is it a house or apartment?

Does it have a yard?

Is it near a park?

Where would I go to school?

Will my parents come here?

What are the Foster Parents like?

What do you like to do?
What can I call you?
What do you tell others about me?
Will you celebrate my birthday?
What about special holidays?
Will you let my parents call?

Feelings

How do I deal with people's questions,
people's good intentions and sympathy?
I'm lonely? What can I do?
Who can I talk to that will understand?
Can I bring something from home?
How can I have privacy?

*Summaries, pictures and video tapes about
the foster family and home may be helpful.*

Helping children and youth get answers from other kids

What is Foster Care?

What is a foster family?
Why do they foster?
Is this forever?
Will the foster parents
become my real parents?
Is what I've heard about
foster care true?

How do I meet other kids in care?

Are there other kids like me?
What's a youth in care group?
Can I join?

Asking other children and youth in care

What's a foster kid?
How do you feel about being in care?
What do you do when people ask you about
being in care?
Who can I trust to talk to?
Do you bring things from home?

Helping children and youth make sense of the system

Natural Parents' Roles

- Plan of care
- Rights of parents and children
- Visiting together

Youth in Care Roles (local and beyond)

- Support from other youth
- Buddy system
- Other contacts

Agency Roles

- Agency as guardian
- Payment to foster parent
- Who else to talk with there
- What the agency decides

Foster Parents' Roles

Relationship to agency
What the foster parent decides
Payment and what it covers
Foster parent holidays
and evenings out

Worker's Roles

Who the worker is/responsibilities
What does my worker need to know?
Worker visits: privacy, what to tell,
where to meet, when,
how to make visits useful
When and how to call my worker
Other workers I have

Court and Police Roles

What does the judge decide?
What does a lawyer do?
Why are the police involved?
Court procedures

Foster Care Personal Information

How do I reach my worker?

My worker's name is _____

My worker's title is _____

My workers' phone number is _____

My agency's name and address is _____

The best time to call is _____

Who to call if my worker isn't there _____

Another youth in care I can call is _____

Some things I can call my worker about are (examples: good things that happen, problems, visits, appointments) _____

Who to call if there's a problem that doesn't get solved _____

Where am I going?

My foster family's name is _____

They live at _____

Their phone number is _____

Number of children who live there __ Ages of the children _____

Kind of place _____

Do I have my own room? _____

Are there pets? _____

Start to Finish

You were there when I came into the world today
You were by my side every step of the way
When I first fell off my bike and scraped my knee
You were there for me.
When I passed grades one, two and three
You were there for me.

When I was twelve, all you did was fight day and night
My life was in shambles, but you didn't care to see
You weren't there for me.

I came into a new world so fast I couldn't tell the present
from the past.
I was moving from home to home, there was no major fee
I was searching for the person again who would care for me.

After travelling to many scary and happy places I found a
family that care for me,
Standing beside me day after day, every small step of the way.
As I learn every step of that way, those people are loving me
Day after day.

Life is never fair, taking the good with the bad,
The happy with the sad;
When I die you'll see
someone will be there for me.

Find that special family who cares and loves you too
And if you care for them they'll be there for you.

Dan

Hamilton

ABOUT ME!



I might be coming to live with you.
There are some things
about me that you might want to know.

Explanatory note:

This information about you will help your potential Foster Parent get to know you better.

My name is: (first name only) _____

My age: ____ Birth Date: ____/____/____

The members of my family are: (first names only)

Parents: _____

Brothers and sisters: (give ages) _____

I am in grade _____

My personal interests and activities are: (eg. sports, reading, music)

Community organizations that I belong to: (eg. scouts, girl guides, YMCA.)

My favourite foods are: _____

My least favourite foods are: _____

Some of my fears/worries are: _____

I have the following medical problems: (eg. allergies)

Friends and family I'd like to keep in touch with: _____

Other things you should know about me: (eg. goals, special wants)

I'm looking foward to meeting you!!

(first name only)

Placement information

To be filled in by the social worker at time of placment

Family doctor: _____

Telephone: _____

Healthcard: _____

School: _____

Legal status

Care by agreement [] from: ____/____/____ to: ____/____/____

Society Ward [] from: ____/____/____ to: ____/____/____

Crown Ward [] Social worker _____



So you're thinking about coming
to live with us.

Here are some things about our family that
you might want to know.

Explanation note:

Foster parents are asked to complete this form for the purpose of sharing it with a potential foster child who will be placed in their home.

The members of our family are: (first names only)

Parents: _____

Children: (include ages) _____

Foster children: (include ages) _____

Our family lives in: (city, town) _____

A brief description of our house: _____

A brief description of our neighbourhood: _____

The schools in our area are: _____

About your room: (location, sharing, what it's like) _____

Our family pets are: _____

Our family interests and activities are: _____

Our individual interests and activities are: _____

We decided to be a foster family because: _____

Employment: Mother: _____ Father: _____

Things we'll expect from you: You are an individual, therefore when we get to know each other, we will talk about these expectations with you and your social worker.

Looking forward to meeting you!!

(first name only)



Family & Children's Services
of St. Thomas & Elgin
410 Sunset Drive
St. Thomas, Ontario
N5R 3C7

Note: Original pamphlet not exactly as shown.



Why am I different?

We are people with feelings the same as you,
So why do you like to pick on us?
We have done nothing wrong,
So why such fuss?

Sure we didn't have wonderful lives
But now we're trying to survive.
Most of us lived on welfare and lived in dives
Because our parents couldn't keep us alive.

Is it our fault that we came in to this world?
Did we ask for the life that we had?
NO, we relied on our parents for a "good life",
But what happens to us when our parents are bad?

The CAS is a parent for us.
If you think we're different, just hear us say,
"We're human just like you; we have feelings, ambitions,
dreams and fantasies,
So give us a fair chance, understand how we feel and watch
us succeed."

Brenda

Kawartha

Helping children and youth understand who does what

*Foster Parents, Worker and Agency
work together as a team with my natural
family and me. What I need from:*

Foster Parents

Individual attention
Ask what I want to be called
Keep my background private
Patience, understanding
Respect and caring
Fair treatment in relation to others
Not get upset when I tell worker
about the foster home
Sensitivity to my special needs
Respect for my cultural or
religious differences
Help with my homework
Nutritious meals
Help in solving problems
Be knowledgeable and informed
Have input into plan of care

Natural Parents

Involvement according to individual plans of care

Worker

Help in settling
Listening and visiting
Regular private visits
in a comfortable setting
Help with my natural family
Help to participate in plan of
care/meetings
Discuss and help with my
special needs
Respect for cultural differences

Agency

Consistent worker/contact
Life book/history information
Stability and support
Respect for cultural differences
Develop and implement
plan of care
Help with special needs

Helping Children and Youth understand how their worker affects their lives

Privacy/Who else to talk with

Other workers, supervisor, other youth in care, buddies, special friends, teacher, volunteers, Office of Child and Family Advocacy, Ombudsman, lawyer, other advocate

Problem-Solving

How and where to complain when workers or foster families break the rules. Who to talk with--who else?
Safety (dealing with aggression).
Unacceptable discipline and consequences; physical restraint
Meetings with foster parent, worker and me.

The Foster Family

How I get along with my foster family, other foster kids, natural kids
Do I have to like the foster family?

Money

Allowance, spending money, outings, recreation, lessons, school supplies, trips, clothes, personal needs, presents for others, transportation, more education, other things

Moves

Requesting a move
Asking not to move
Finding out about choices
Visiting a new place

Visiting

Parents, siblings, old friends and neighbours
Transportation for me or my family

Other Things

Race and culture
Natural parents' and foster family's vacations.
Benefits I may be eligible for.
Summer camp and activities

Helping children and youth understand what foster parents decide

Names

What can I call you?
What do you tell others about me?
Are you my parents now?

Who are you?

What do you already
know about me?
What should I tell you?
What is your job?
Who is your boss?
Do you get paid for taking
care of me?

Permissions

What can you give permission for?
What should I ask my worker?

Visiting

Natural family visits
Visits with relatives
Visits with old and new friends
How visits are arranged
Transportation

Helping children and youth understand the foster home

Understanding the rules

Boundaries in the house and neighbourhood; whereabouts
Visiting friends and overnights
Privacy and personal possessions
Television, music and video games
Use of the telephone, chores
Staying home alone, house keys
Fighting and teasing
Curfews, dating
Street safety, smoking

Unacceptable Adult and Child/Youth Behaviour

Fighting, teasing, threats, name-calling, yelling, tickling, hitting, favouritism

Health

Sexuality
Birth control
Health care needs

Things to do

Sports, parties, shopping,
hobbies, help with homework,
lessons, activities
Places to hang out
Youth in Care meetings/groups

Breaking rules

What happens if I break the rules?
What if foster parents break a rule?

Holidays

What about holidays?
Family traditions?
Can I celebrate mine?

Problem solving

Can we work this out together?
If not, who and what do I tell?
How do I get heard?
Roles of foster parents, workers
Discipline and consequences
Physical restraint
Favouritism

Helping children and youth with school

Foster Parents

Do you contact the school?
What do you tell the school?
What do I tell people about
where I live?
How do I explain about changing
schools?
Can I join extra-curricular activities?
Clubs and dances?
How do I get to school?
What about homework?

Agency

Can the agency help me get into
the school I want?
How can the agency help me finish school?

*Why do I have to go to school?
Why is it important?
What happens if I don't go?*

Workers

Can I stay in my same school?
If not, what school do I go to?
Where is it?
What grade or program?
Are there other foster kids there?
Do I get special help?
Where's my school record?
How do I explain about changing schools?
Who helps if I have problems at school?
Who will help me register and get oriented?
What do I call myself?
Who knows I'm in foster care?
Do I have to tell "my story"?

Helping children and youth get comfortable with the neighbourhood

Other Youth in Care

How do I fit in?
How to find things to do?
How to get to know the neighbourhood?

Worker

What about the neighbourhood?
Where is the town/the street?
What is there to do?
What does it look like?

Foster Parents

What are my boundaries?
Are there any places that are off limits?
Where can I go to meet friends?
Can I use public transit?
Will you show me?
Where can I go for recreation?
Will you show me where the school is?

Helping children and youth understand their rights and responsibilities – again and again

Natural Family

(with access)

Their rights and responsibilities
Their participation in my plan of care
Private visits and calls
Information sharing

Others who can help

Supervisors
Other workers
Office of Child and Family Advocacy
Teachers, Friends
Youth in Care Group

Agency

What's the complaint's procedure?
What's my responsibility in the
complaint's procedure?

Foster Parents

What should I tell you?
Tell me the rules so I know.

Worker

What are my rights in care?
What are my responsibilities in care?
How do I get a say in what happens to me?
What if I don't like what's going on?
What's the complaints procedure?
What should I tell you?
How can I ask for a change in something?
How should I be involved in my plan of care?

Youth in care

Who do I talk to when things
aren't going right?
How do I complain?

Summary of legislated rights in care

- ✓ right not to be detained in locked setting
- ✓ right to be free from corporal punishment
- ✓ right to private communication with family
- ✓ right to private communication with advocates
- ✓ right to send and receive communication uncensored
- ✓ right to reasonable privacy and personal possessions
- ✓ right to practice religion of choice
- ✓ right to plan of care
- ✓ right to involvement in plan of care
- ✓ right to adequate nutrition

- ✓ right to appropriate and adequate clothing
- ✓ right to medical and dental care
- ✓ right to an education
- ✓ right to participate in recreation and activities
- ✓ right to parental consent regarding religious and educational activities, and/or to give or refuse consent for medical treatment
- ✓ right to expression of views regarding treatment, placement decisions, etc.
- ✓ right to be informed
- ✓ right to a complaint procedure
- ✓ right to have child abuse reported

Helping children and youth understand about their past and future

Agency

Do you keep a life book for me?
What am I eligible for?

Older Youth

What's it like growing up in care?
What's independent living like?

Foster Parents

Do you keep photos and momentos for me?

Worker

What's a plan of care?
What do I get to decide?
What can I help decide?
How can I be involved in deciding?
Where is my natural family? Can I call them?
When can I see them? How do I get there?
How can I get what I want and need?
What other choices do I have?
Where do I go to live after this home?
Do I have to finish school?
Can I get more education or training?
Can I try independent living?
Can I read my file? What's my future?

To the strength of youth today

Here's to all the anger and turmoil we reach

Here's to all the sorrow and loss we see,

Here's to all the pain and hardships we beat,

Here's to the bravery of youth today,

Here's a solemn salute,

To the strength of the youth today.

Shawn

Thunder Bay

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